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“I felt like a man”: West Indian Troops under Fire During the First World War

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Abstract

This article, examines representations of the British West Indies Regiment's service during the First World War to explore how limits on their service were negotiated and how tropes of 'martial races' were adapted to ensure the contributions of West Indian men were recognised. The article examines West Indian experience in Europe and the Middle East, drawing on a rich variety of textual and visual sources: official histories of West Indian regiments, memoirs written by padres who served with the troops, letters from the men as published in newspapers like the Daily Gleaner and the Jamaica Times, and official photographs. It argues that 'combat gnosticism' was replicated in another form within these representations to construct a definition of military service that included these black men and validated their contributions.

Keywords

Race, British Empire, First World War, Identity, Combat, West Indies, Caribbean

Introduction

Writing in an editorial for the *Federalist and Grenada People* in June 1915, the black political activist William Galwey Donovan lamented the British Government's failure to recruit a West Indian contingent and black men more generally to fight in the First World War.¹ Though he acknowledged that 'the old West India Regiment may be doing garrison duty', the 'Senegalese, West Coast blacks, are fighting side by side with their white French comrades', other West Indian men and black men across the British Empire were not afforded the same opportunities for combatant service.

Why has not England utilised in the same manner the services of her black warriors? Because of the nasty cowardly skin prejudice characteristic of the Empire. This war however will end that.²

Writing just prior to the initial enlistment of men for the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR), Galwey Donovan asserted the martial abilities of black men, drawing on historic episodes of black men's triumph in battle to counter British refusals to mobilise all of its colonial troops in combat. 'What about the Zulus who once annihilated a British force and "Fuzzy Wuzzy" who broke a British square?', he asked his reader.³ He envisioned a re-ordering of empire, drawing on martial language, where the participation of black men in the war posed a challenge to imperial structures, if not their destruction. But much of this was dependent on service through combat and fighting, a test and demonstration of the quality of black men's masculinity. Even those West Indians who were less critical of the Empire saw the First World War as an opportunity to secure further rights and freedoms and to improve the status of the islands, if the men were allowed to fight.⁴ Adrian Gregory has demonstrated the complex social pressures at play in encouraging 'voluntary' enlistment.⁵ In the West Indian case, these included the need to demonstrate the worth of black West Indian men, as well as serving the Empire and their obligation to do 'the right thing' in this moralised conflict. Unfortunately, though the men of the BWIR 'volunteered', enlisted, trained as and remained a soldiering

regiment, restrictions were placed on their duties, which meant that only a small proportion saw active combat during their service.

Though Donovan was quick to dismiss the garrison duty being done by the West India Regiments (WIR), these men had long been armed as soldiers and influenced understanding of black military and combatant masculinity in the British West Indies. Those military officials who had commanded black soldiers across the British Empire including the WIR, particularly in Africa, used the previous service of such forces to argue for black enlistment in the First World War.⁶ The writing of Major Alfred Ellis in his 1885 *History of the First West India Regiment* had attempted to create a martial rhetoric distinct to the WIR soldiers at this point which demonstrates the capability of these black men as soldiers, their suitability to their work and particularly their embodied martial strength. Ellis described 'the English-speaking negro of the West Indies' as the

Most excellent material for a soldier. He is docile, patient, brave and faithful, and for an officer who knows how to gain his affection - an easy matter, requiring only justness, good temper, and an ear ready to listen patiently to any tale of real or imaginary grievance - he will do anything.⁷

These accounts of previous West Indian service and the development of creole identity in the West Indies promoted the suitability of West Indian men as soldiers and their closer 'character' to the English.⁸ Established in 1795, units of the WIR served during the Napoleonic Wars, achieving success in expeditions throughout the nineteenth century in Dominica, Martinique, Ashanti, Guadeloupe, West Africa and Sierra Leone. During the First World War, the WIR served garrison duty in Sierra Leone with a detachment serving in the German Cameroons.⁹ The WIR had never served in Europe and the War Office did not want to deploy them there, but there remained the intention to find a way for broader West Indian participation in the imperial struggle: this took the form of the BWIR.¹⁰

With the decision to recruit a new contingent of volunteers from the West Indies in 1915, there seemed a real possibility that the men would be sent to fight on the

Western Front, given their soldiering status. Unlike the French, who were willing to use their colonial forces in Europe, the British government had demonstrated more concern about the potential consequences of such an action.¹¹ At the outbreak of the war, Britain did not immediately call upon all of its colonial populations for additional support in what was perceived to be a 'white man's war'.¹² Britain's early deployment of the British Indian Army to Europe in 1914 opened up, though, the possibility of other non-white troops being sent to the Western Front, as well as troops from the white dominions.¹³ This was further necessitated by manpower requirements across the global theatres of war. From the BWIR's conception, though, there was ongoing consideration as to the best way to utilise the regiment. C. L. Joseph has demonstrated how in June 1915 the General Officer Command in Chief, Sir Archibald Murray, who had previously served in South Africa, refused to support plans by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to convert the BWIR into pioneers for employment on the railways in Mesopotamia.¹⁴ Murray recognised how anxious the BWIR were to fight for empire and how resentful their supporters in the West Indies would be to see the BWIR being turned into a labour corps, even under the banner of a pioneer battalion. Some units of the BWIR would be used in this way. On 31 October 1915, the Army Council decided the men were best used mainly on the ammunition dumps in France, in the hopes that 'the duties, arduous and dangerous [...] were more likely to satisfy the expectations of the West Indian volunteers for active military service than were the menial tasks of labour corps.'¹⁵ As will be seen, there was some truth in this desire: the BWIR men used the dangers of these duties, frequently under heavy shellfire, to construct their wartime narratives as a form of combatant service. Yet, this restriction of the BWIR to non-combatant duties seems to have been rarely communicated to the men themselves and throughout their accounts, we can trace an expectation of the eventual call to fight on the frontlines and that these would be the battlefields of the Western Front.

Between 1915 and 1918, 15,204 West Indians, mainly black, experienced military service in Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, East Africa, France, Italy, Belgium and England as members of the BWIR.¹⁶ The first contingent of the BWIR arrived in England in October 1915, where they went into training at Seaford, Sussex.¹⁷ By the end of 1915, 2,448 men and 48 officers had arrived in Britain: a total of three battalions, two representative of the entire West Indies, the third exclusively Jamaican.¹⁸ At the completion of their training in April 1916, these battalions were sent to the Levant base in Alexandria, Egypt where they were subsequently broken up. This followed a tradition employed with the WIR of splitting up black regiments: the WIR's units were stationed in companies in distant areas throughout the Caribbean – Belize, Jamaica and the Bahamas – and rarely as a complete regiment. Some went to the East African Expeditionary Force in Mombasa to be attached to the second WIR, to garrison territories seized from the Germans, uniting the distinct West Indian forces. Others went to Mesopotamia to join the Indian Expeditionary Force for non-combatant duties. Most left Egypt for Marseilles, where trains took them to the Western Front to work on the ammunition dumps. The fifth reserve battalion were sent to Egypt, joining the remaining men of the first and second, and it was detachments from these battalions who saw active service, including training in using light machine guns, Lewis guns and trench mortars. These battalions joined the general advance towards the Jordan Valley in 1918. All successive contingents were sent to work on the ammunition dumps in France, attached to the British Expeditionary Force for employment deployment in all the main operations, including the battles of the Somme, Arras, Messines and Ypres. The distinction in the type of roles the men were allocated to was dependent on geographic location: they could fight against the non-white, predominantly Ottoman Turkish enemy in Egypt and Palestine, but not against white German forces on the Western Front.

This exclusion of West Indian servicemen, in both the BWIR and WIR, from frontline combat on the Western Front has been convincingly demonstrated by Richard Smith and others to be 'part of a damage-limitation exercise' to ensure white predominance, ensuring that black men and white men could not be compared or compete.¹⁹ Joseph remarks on the 'myth cultivated by the War Office' that the fighting qualities of the West Indians were suspect in order to secure white authority: that the black soldiers were perceived to have a lack of discipline and rationality was why they were not permitted to fight in the same way as white forces, from Britain and the Dominions, or indeed the soldiers of the British Indian Army mobilised so quickly at the outbreak of the conflict. This partly related to hierarchies of 'martial race' theories, which fuelled ideas of what the ideal colonial soldiering masculinity should appear to be. As Heather Streets has argued, the martial race soldiers were not just 'raced' but 'gendered' as ideally masculine; alongside their 'racial hardiness' were notions of loyalty, honour and devotion.²⁰ The British Indian Army included the 'martial' Punjabi Sikhs and Gurkhas from Nepal, who were not only predisposed to the arts of war but who contained their 'barbarism' within masculine codes of obedience and allegiance. There was a link between African martial traditions and West Indian service in the WIR, for example the desire to recruit Coromantees from the beginning of the nineteenth century. However, questions around discipline remained – Smith comments on ongoing attitudes in the early twentieth century about West Indian soldiers having 'limited intellect' and being 'lax' on ideas of discipline, rest and neatness.²¹

The restriction of the BWIR to non-combatant duties was, above all, an issue of race: having black men armed against a white enemy, serving alongside white men as their equal, with the associated status of being a soldier in white Western Europe was a clear threat to the imperial order.²² At the same time, it was also an issue of gender, where West Indian men were not seen to fit within the ideal masculinities of the martial

racism, whether in the War Office rhetoric or in the implicit judgement made upon the men by the limits placed on their service. This had consequences for how the West Indian men constructed their masculinity when writing about the war as they did not participate in the physical fighting which was deemed to be the ultimate test of masculinity. War was essentially gendered as male and the soldier hero held up as a masculine ideal: brave, courageous, physically strong and enduring.²³ As Graham Dawson has argued, narratives of heroism have been given 'a particular inflection in discourses of the nation', focusing on the British context.²⁴ The 'hegemonic project' of masculinity was made visible as men were called upon to demonstrate the extent of national and imperial strength in direct competition with the men of other nations and empires.²⁵ This was, not least, in the presentation of the male body as a symbol of the healthy nation and society: physical fitness was emphasised and tested through the activities of service.²⁶ Men's perceptions of their own identity, as men and as 'soldiers', were, as Jessica Meyer has demonstrated, contingent on a number of factors, including danger, location and the nature of their service.²⁷ For the British soldiers who served on the frontline of the Western Front, expressions of the experience of shellfire, war's horrors and service and sacrifice were understood as 'the defining qualities of martial courage'.²⁸ Though rarely explicitly writing about masculinity, these narratives – as articulated in letters home or in memoirs – reflected the men's understanding of themselves as men, 'both physically and emotionally'.²⁹

For the men of the BWIR, though, the same frontline experience was not necessarily available and the contingent circumstance of location and service came more firmly into play because of the restrictions they experienced. As Meyer has observed of the writing of young men who volunteered for medical service because of their religious beliefs, languages of heroism and conquest allowed these men 'to lay claim to a share of the ethos of service in war-time, an ethos that was key to ideals of appropriate masculine

identity.’³⁰ How then did West Indian servicemen respond when the ‘firmly gendered’ activity of combat was made unavailable to them? This restriction could limit the potential gains of West Indians following the war, whether within the imperial structure or independent from it. Claiming a share of the wartime ethos of service depended on the realisation of heroic masculine ideals and seeing these inflected with particular national or collective discourses. The same model of heroism had not been applied previously to West Indian men – writings on the WIR, as in Ellis’ *History*, seem dominated by the emphasis on these men’s capacity as soldiers, not necessarily soldier heroes. West Indian accounts of their service in the First World War needed to communicate their participation in a way that acknowledged their martial, masculine abilities and the impact of their efforts, despite not serving in the way in which they had imagined. This article demonstrates the tropes of West Indian war writing through which the men developed languages of war and heroism in relation to their non-combatant service, drawing on martial race rhetoric: their fitness, training and ‘soldierly bearing’ emphasised the embodied experience of war; proximity to the frontline indicated the significance of their work; and the dangers they faced showed them to be heroes. By claiming the language of heroism in their letters home, as published in local newspapers, there was an ongoing articulation of West Indian men’s sense of themselves and their service throughout the war, rather than a static identity.

It is useful in this context to examine accounts of West Indian experience in both Europe and the Middle East, to explore how the geographical divergences affected the men’s writings. The experience of service in East Africa and Mesopotamia is not discussed here due to the smaller numbers of men who served there and the lack of source material from these fronts. The Western Front and Egypt and Palestine are examined in turn, predominantly drawing upon the letters written by West Indian servicemen that were published in newspapers like the *Daily Gleaner* and the *Jamaican*

Times. As has been detailed elsewhere, these letters pose problems for analysis in the nature of their selection – individual letters were supplied by families or friends for publication with extracts chosen by the editor, to be read by a much wider audience than intended, separated from other correspondence (unlike archival letter collections) and with limited information about the letter writer – but they remain critical and rich sources for the analysis of West Indian experience.³¹ These letters are read in conversation with official histories of West Indian regiments and memoirs written by padres who served with the troops, demonstrating how different proximities to West Indian service both echoed and challenged particular tropes.

‘Where the shells are bursting all around’: The Western Front³²

Perhaps one of the most familiar images of West Indian troops on the Western Front during the war was an official photograph of some of the men ‘in action’, stacking shells at an ammunition dump on the Gordon Road in Ypres, in October 1917 (Figure 1). The men worked alongside Australian and New Zealand troops, an image of an inclusive British Empire united not in arms but in the supply of those who were. The strain of this essential war work was visually revealed in the men’s bodies, stripped down to their shirtsleeves.

Figure 1. West Indian troops stacking 8-inch shells at a dump on the Gordon Road, Ypres, October 1917. © IWM (E(AUS) 2078)

Stacking shells at ammunition dumps was one of the many labour duties to which the BWIR men were assigned when on the Western Front, as well as unloading transports and stretcher bearing. This was dangerous work – working on the dumps meant handling ammunition as well as frequently being the targets for German bombardment – and the men did not have any means of protecting themselves. Yet, as explained above, this work has been understood as somewhat lesser than active combat

due to the terms upon which service was judged. James Campbell has suggested that both the war poets and their critics, particularly Paul Fussell, have created an ideology of what he terms ‘combat gnosticism’: that *fighting* in war was an exclusive experience made only understandable and communicable to those who had also taken part in combat.³³

Reports of the war in the West Indies had created a particular focus on France and the Western Front and in their desire to reach France, many of the men revealed that they were unaware of the restrictions placed on their service in Europe. Private Elmo Sweetland, for example, wrote home in July 1916 that, ‘we will soon be sent to the firing line. I am hoping it will be to France – then we can show what Jamaicans can do. Yes, it will be a happy day when I return to Jamaica, if I live it out, but even if I do not I am quite contented to die for England. I am only too eager now to be sent to the firing line.’³⁴ Yet, arriving at the ‘firing line’ did not necessarily mean showing ‘what Jamaicans can do’ in the manner, which Sweetland envisioned.

As a result, reports from those who worked with the West Indians and the men’s own writing highlighted the essential nature and dangers of these duties to expand understandings of ‘combat’. More than adopting monikers like the ‘King George Steam Engine’ to disassociate themselves from the inferior status of labour battalions, men of the BWIR instead reshaped how this work was perceived.³⁵ One padre who served with a battalion of the BWIR, Alfred Horner, implored his West Indian readership: ‘do not think, though, for a single second that we had become mere labourers and had lost either our military style or our military bearing.’³⁶ The men’s retention of soldier status was crucial to underpinning new notions of service. It acted to buttress the masculinity of the BWIR men, which was in peril by the change in occupation, if not by their status. The men’s position as soldiers retained for them a certain amount of privilege over other labour battalions. Horner would go on to describe that his BWIR men did not get on with the ordinary native labour corps, particularly the Chinese, because of the West

Indian's 'somewhat irritating habit of rubbing in the fact that being soldiers [they] are on an immeasurably higher social scale than a mere labourer who is working for a wage.'³⁷

As well as placing the men in a higher rank, the continued status of the men as soldiers gave them access to and ownership of particular vocabularies of combat with which to represent their service. After all, these men had been trained as soldiers. Military style and bearing was expected of them and so could be performed through their descriptions of their work.

In the construction of new narratives of masculinity under fire, the West Indian men drew on particular tropes, the most frequent being their proximity to the frontline, which attempted to undercut suggestions of labour duties happening far from the conflict. These most frequently related to experiences loading ammunition. A Mr D. G. McDonald 'now serving at the front' had a letter published in the *Gleaner* in November 1916, where he wrote about the 'very important job' found for his battalion. After just three weeks in Egypt, the men were 'unceremoniously hurried off to France', where 'our regiment has now been sent up close to the firing line, where we are now hard at work striving against the Boches.'³⁸ Working to supply the guns with ammunition, McDonald considered himself and his battalion an integral part of the great offensive. Though supplying the guns instead of firing them, he positioned this work as a direct attack on the Germans – 'striving against' – rather than a more passive contribution happening behind the lines. Private Nabtar Forbes, of the 3rd battalion of the BWIR, similarly used his spatial position to assert his brave masculinity.

I am longing to see this terrible war over, nevertheless I know I am not a coward, for what I have passed and am still passing through is enough to kill hundreds of cowards. I am now in the firing line, as you will see by my address. I am away over in France. I am just where the shells are bursting all around.³⁹

By being in the place 'just where the shells are bursting all around', Forbes became an active participant, no coward but a survivor. His narrative of endurance, dependent on

his courage to stay in such a place, does not include details of the role he was carrying out. The specifics are unnecessary, unlike McDonald's letter; simply by persisting within this space, Forbes demonstrated that he knew he was not a coward and so navigated any suggestions of humiliation or lesser masculinity. Though some disputed the frontline status claimed by McDonald, Forbes and others, the reach of the modern weaponry left all exposed to fire.⁴⁰

Usually, though, specifics of the roles being carried out were employed to enable the men to emphasise the significance of their work. This was usually in relation to the quantity of weaponry they were handling and the speed with which it was done: McDonald wrote that the 'work consists of keeping the guns supplied with ammunition, as fast as they need it, and a huge quantity is expended every day.'⁴¹ Lieutenant Garnet W. Mendes offered facts and figures to his readers.

Our detachment is only a tiny drop in the ocean and so as to give you some idea of what is going on I shall just state a few facts. Many and many a night I take 100 or 120 men and handled between eight and nine hundred tons of ammunitions. I mean heavy stuff, shells ranging from 4.5 up to 15 inch.... Have you any idea what it means to have guns placed 30 or 40 yards apart over miles of frontage all vomiting shells as fast as the gunners can work them?⁴²

Again, the men of the BWIR were placed as an integral part of the vast machinery of war. The weight and quantity of shells that they were supplying to guns spread across 'miles of frontage' enables the reader to try to imagine the realities of such work and grasp its importance. The large shells in the above photograph were eight inches so the men were working with some almost double the size. The significance of the work the West Indian men were carrying out, and carrying out well, was further demonstrated in the praise they received from commanding officers, which was often included in their letters. Lieutenant Mendes wrote of his pride in his men as he watched them loading materials: 'I have seen the men thoroughly wet through on a beautifully cool night, but it does my heart good to see the men 'getting their backs into it.'⁴³ It was the men's

persistence and commitment, despite poor conditions, that is highlighted. McDonald also emphasised the work his Division had carried out and the commendation of a senior officer.

Our men put up a brilliant showing, by the manner in which they put through their work, and the Lieut. Colonel who was in charge of the Division to which we were attached said he had never seen men work as that before. As a result of that, the work was done in such record time that the [blank] specially congratulated the Division and thanked them to the valuable way they had assisted in smashing up the enemy.⁴⁴

The new speed reached by the men was a signifier of the particular strength of the West Indian battalions and their diligence in fulfilling their tasks. Again McDonald explicitly linked this work to the broader success of the offensive; West Indians had played their role in ‘smashing up the enemy’. This may not have been combat but the work the men did was seen to have a direct impact at the front.

What draws together reports of proximity to the frontline, the heavy and laborious work carried out and the commendations that West Indian battalions received was the idea of danger, both implicitly and explicitly suggested. The demonstration of the dangers faced by the men ensured their contribution was included within ‘the economies of sacrifice’, that they, too, were fulfilling their obligations to take part and that the British government would subsequently be in their debt.⁴⁵ This debt, it was thought, would be repaid through further rights and freedoms, the re-organisation of the Empire or the granting of independence. The men themselves wrote of injuries acquired in the course of their work. Nabtar Forbes had his right hand crushed while handling the shells, a common industrial accident made all the more perilous in the managing of live ammunition so close to the frontline.⁴⁶ Another padre with a BWIR battalion, John Ramson, reminded his readers that ‘all positions were perilous, owing to the fact that the Germans of course shelled the dumps and the trains continually.’⁴⁷ He detailed the hard work the men did ‘to unload truck after truck of heavy boxes, or heavier shells, sort them out and stack them in heaps on the ramp for re-loading in the narrow gauge

railways'.⁴⁸ There was another form of 'Gnosticism' at play as this witness positioned labouring duties as an experience that aligned with the dangers of combat sufficiently to include these men in the recognised war effort.

This also opened up the possibility of heroic narratives to be expressed and detailed by the men, using deeds of daring and courage to represent black West Indian masculinity on the frontline. This was usually in response to bombardment. The *Gleaner's* special correspondent with the troops reported on the 'nasty habit' of German planes 'floating around in the air at night and when not engaged in dropping bombs on hospitals, he pays a certain amount of attention to dumps and other places of military importance.'⁴⁹ Immediately, the importance of these sites to the war effort is emphasised. He went on to report on one particularly heavy bombardment.

He dropped eight pellets in quick succession in the space of a hundred yards, wounding five of the boys of B Coy, and setting fire to a stack on the dump. Every man turned to at once on the job of outing the fire, a pretty dangerous task, for there may be an explosion any moment, or the airman, aided by the light from the blaze, may decide on a little grouping practice on the same target.⁵⁰

The immediate response by the men, though aware of the dangers, reflected particular heroic qualities: swift action, coolness, and collective endeavour. The men risked themselves, not to save wounded men as per battlefield heroism, but to prevent further injuries to the essential manpower the battalion provided and the loss of significant amounts of ammunition.

The experience of heroism in such circumstances was presented in one remarkable West Indian letter published in the *Gleaner*, from Lance Corporal A. L. Henry. Henry described working on an ammunition dump on the Western Front under German shellfire. The dump caught fire and threatened to explode, much like the example above. Henry was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for gallant work under shellfire, and perhaps because he had received such an honour, he felt able to describe the heroic deed.

Well, I was exceptionally lucky. It was a narrow and marvellous escape, but I stuck it – myself, a sergeant by the name of England, one of our officers and a couple of Belgian soldiers – to the finish. Dozens got wounded and a few more were killed. The dump was being shelled. One of the shells hit in amongst a very large stack of shells and cartridges, all of a sudden with a great explosion that seemed to rent the earth. The dump began to go up and every man turned to his gas mask and shrapnel helmet. The majority started to run away, some stuck in their dugouts. Big shells were flying about in the air. I looked up the orderly room and had just left when a shell came through the roof. It was as dangerous running away as going to it. One fellow had already been killed running away. I felt like a man: my spirit was suddenly up and in a reckless way I dashed into the thick of it.⁵¹

The danger of the scenario fuelled a rush of adrenaline and a heightened sense of masculinity; this was a demonstration of Henry's manliness, which was recognised by the medal he was awarded. This was an exceptional instance of daring: Henry described himself as 'reckless', his spirit was 'up' and he thought little of the consequences and was lucky to be alive. In Henry's narrative, the bombardment of the ammunition dump transformed the scene into a combatant space, where men were being killed, shells were flying and there was little chance of escape. By dashing 'into the thick of it', Henry drew on existing martial languages to present his deeds like a soldier in the thick of battle, fighting alongside those of higher rank and Belgian soldiers, who would have been armed, 'to the finish'. Though this was not the 'fire' of the frontline, Henry used the dangers of the experience and his heroic response to equate his actions with that of a combatant.

What separates the accounts of the padres Horner and Ramson, as witnesses to the men's work, from the letters of Henry and others is the degree to which the men remain contained within colonial structures. Horner's account of West Indian stretcher bearing validated the work the men did in France.

Working all the time with a most exemplary cheerfulness, conscious that they were at any rate doing valuable, necessary, dangerous work, and – who knows? – probably forging another link in that brotherhood of empire, for possibly some lad from a far distant clime, of another race, may remember with sympathy and affection the day when our West Indian coloured lads carried him out of danger to life and to health.⁵²

Yet Horner limits the degree to which the experience of the West Indian men can be directly compared with that of white British soldiers. Drawing on the rhetoric surrounding the 'martial races', the men were cheerful, conscientious and loyal participants in the imperial project by 'forging another link in that brotherhood of empire'. Though Horner took a great deal of pride in the abilities of the battalion he served with and promoted West Indian service, his aim was not to challenge the structures upon which the British Empire was organised. His narrative of the quasi-soldiering experience of the BWIR on the Western Front sought its recognition as essential and dangerous, but in an entirely non-threatening manner. The letters by A. L. Henry and others further emphasised the initiative taken by the men and their agency over their actions, as well as instances of heroism and direct intervention the success of campaigns. As a result, West Indian men's service as non-combatants was not only negotiated by the men themselves, but revealed significant constructions of masculinity that were independent from notions of both the 'aggressive black warrior' and the 'obedient colonial'.

“Arm-Chair” Soldiers’: Egypt and Palestine⁵³

The battalions of the BWIR who served in Egypt and Palestine and fought on these fronts had an easier job of describing their service than those in France. As active combatants, the black West Indians became part of the soldierly understanding of war and military service, rather than excluded as mere labourers. There was little need for negotiation when the men's work made such a direct and obvious contribution to the conflict, albeit on a front with less of a profile than the fighting in Western Europe. It is unsurprising, then, that service records from the Middle Eastern fronts were frequently the examples drawn upon by historians writing immediately after the conflict about the contributions of the West Indies. The emphasis on these experiences acted to ensure

that the soldiering status of the BWIR was not forgotten; through these, they would be remembered as soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel Wood-Hill, who commanded the first battalion of the BWIR in Egypt and Palestine, quoted letters he received praising his men, including one from E. W. C. Chaytor who wrote about ‘the very good work’ done by the first battalion in the Jordan Valley.

Outside my own division, there are no troops I would sooner have with me than the B.W.I.R. who have won the highest opinions of all who have been with them during our operations here.⁵⁴

Frank Cundall, historian of Jamaica’s involvement in the First World War, included the work of the BWIR gunners in Egypt and Palestine, recalling their ‘keen interest in their work, cheerfulness, coolness under fire, and an intelligent appreciation of what was required of them and the necessary ability to carry it out under difficulties’.⁵⁵ Cundall quoted one artillery major who watched the Jordan Valley campaign in 1918:

“My God! Are they angels or are they d- fools? Don’t they see shells, don’t they hear shells, don’t they know what shells are?” He was amazed to see men going steadily forward under a terrific hail of shrapnel and high explosive with no more concern than if it were a shower of rain.⁵⁶

The West Indian men stood alone, withstanding heavy shelling in feats of endurance, cool-headedness and bravery. These descriptions echoed the languages of martial races, where tropes such as charging ‘through heavy fire’ or ‘without check or hesitation’ were used to highlight the prowess of the martially able men.⁵⁷ The martial links made between West Indian soldiers and their African ancestry aggression emerged here as appropriately channelled through their role as soldiers. Though Wood-Hill remarked that the West Indian men ‘may be a little bit harder to instil discipline into’, the men ‘possess “guts” without which no man can be turned unto a soldier’, somewhat echoing Major Ellis’ earlier comments on the WIR in 1885.⁵⁸ These histories demonstrated that the West Indian men were fully equipped to be excellent soldiers, using impartial accounts of the men’s martial abilities recorded by white officers, central to securing recognition for West Indian service. The military elite, who had sought to limit the West

Indian men's role, was shown proven wrong by these narratives of West Indians under fire.

In their letters, the West Indian men similarly used time 'under fire' as a marker of success and bravery. Corporal Beresford A. Alexander who had been sent to train in Egypt was buoyed by his 'first excitement'. 'You can imagine the glee we were in to have something to shoot at, after nearly a year of undisturbed waiting.'⁵⁹ Sergeant Forbes wrote from Egypt,

I feel a certain amount of pride in telling you that my battalion has been the first to come under fire... It was pleasing to see the calm and cool manner in which our boys took this their first experience of actual warfare.⁶⁰

Rather than the shelling of ammunition dumps, Forbes' battalion had been bombed when on parade, a target in themselves as combatant forces of the British Empire. 'Our guns' gunned down the plane and this gave the men their initiation into 'actual warfare'. This designation of the fighting in Egypt consequently made the men 'actual' soldiers rather than trainees in West Indian or English camps or the quasi-soldierly actors evident on the Western Front. It also raised the profile of this different, less familiar combatant space for those reading at home.

Training was particularly important in the letters from Egypt and Palestine because the men were preparing to meet the enemy on the battlefield. Their eagerness to get to this point is palpable. Private A. Lester Sampson described his battalion being in the 'best of health' and 'longing to get to the front' so that they could,

Show off what stuff we West Indians are made of. I bet the enemy will wish they had never seen us, for we shall just about smash them to pieces and I hope that we shall very soon have our wish gratified.⁶¹

The frontline was positioned as the central test for West Indian martial masculinities, where the men could demonstrate a particular collective identity through their successful defeat of the enemy. Sampson's account gives a sense of how committed to and well prepared the men were for this test. Private S. E. Johns provided further details of the

nature of this preparation and how the officers had the men ‘practicing the position we are to take in the trenches; extended orders, sham fights, with one company attacking the other, etc.’

All this gives us a more warlike spirit as these operations frequently occur on the present day battlefields. We will likely meet an attack at any time by any of our three enemies, Germans, Turks or Arabs, but we as West Indian soldiers are preparing so bravely and cheerfully, that in any such attacks our enemies shall be surprised, for we all have a fixed determination that we unite under the same old flag to fight for one King and one Empire, and with one hope and one desire and with gallantry we’ll march along, until we conquer, win or die.⁶²

The rousing patriotism with which Johns finishes his letter – the fight for one King and one Empire – is an important signifier of how West Indian masculinities frequently existed within a framework of imperial loyalty. While the reports of West Indian combat by their officers served to isolate the men and highlight the exceptional nature of their bravery and coolness, some of the men used their active participation in battle to draw themselves closer to the Mother Country. Recognition of their particular martial qualities – their warlike spirit, cheerfulness and courage – was not sought singularly from their home nations but as part of the collective efforts of Empire in defeating the enemy.

Though a crucial part of the war, the fighting in Egypt and Palestine was often viewed both at the time and in collective memories of the war as secondary to the industrialised warfare of the Western Front, a notion that those who served there had to contend with.⁶³ The war was fought at a different pace there with short campaigns in disparate regions rather than an identifiable front.⁶⁴ Some of the West Indian men themselves suggested this distinction; one Private Arthur Buckley described the bombs in Egypt as ‘mere child’s play compared to the bravery which is needed to carry on here (France).’⁶⁵ He, for one, felt his service in France eclipsed that of the Middle East and so compared the two to bolster his new role. Yet, Egypt and Palestine remained one of the few places where the West Indian battalions fought as soldiers and, for some, where they spent the whole of their war, but their representations of their experience still had to

navigate the discourse of what constituted ‘war’ during the global conflict. After all, the combat Gnosticism identified by Campbell was largely based on responses to Western Front writing.

As a result, the particular challenges of fighting in the Middle East, particularly the environment in which the fighting took place were highlighted and the men’s descriptions of the challenging environments they fought in should be read, in part, as a further assertion of the value of their service in Egypt and Palestine. Though the West Indian men came from warmer climates than the British men of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, desert life was a new trial. Sun, sand and flies rather than mud, rain and cold distinguished the particular challenges of the Egyptian and Palestinian campaigns. Private Barrett M. Rodrigues described the ‘Egyptian rain’, the sand that blew hard on the man.⁶⁶ Lieutenant Allan A. Dunlop declaimed ‘the heat is bad enough, but the flies, the flies! They are an awful size and actually stick on to one’s face, food and everything else.’⁶⁷ Lance Corporal Clifford P. Cummins wrote of the distribution of khaki helmets rather than cloth caps to protect against the heat as a marker of how hot it was – ‘we are also getting khaki clothing soon’.⁶⁸ Corporal Phillip Lewis commended the men’s perseverance in the East: ‘this part of the world is very, very hot and the country full of flies. In spite of that, the boys on the whole are getting on well and are happy, and fit to do damage to the common foe.’⁶⁹ Positioning the heat and flies almost as another enemy to contend with was an available trope about the campaigns in Egypt and Palestine, which the men could draw upon to emphasise their struggle, as well as a lived reality.

Interestingly, the experience of other colonial soldiers who had served on multiple fronts was mobilised to bolster the West Indians’ service in Egypt. Sergeant C. A. Rickard of the 3rd Contingent wrote home from Whitnoe Camp, England, that,

A few invalids from Egypt have arrived and given news and description of the camp there. Australian soldiers who had been both in Egypt, Salonika and France seem to hold equal opinion of the hardships on the Egyptian desert – a good that this information conveys is to dispel any belief that we are only “arm-chair” soldiers.⁷⁰

Rickard’s letter conveys the ongoing disappointment surrounding West Indian deployment as combatants only in Egypt and Palestine. While the men themselves understood the demands of their work, they could not compare it to the fighting on the Western Front, even if, like Buckley above, they could compare the experience of bombardment. As a result, they either had to emphasise the rigours as demonstrated above or allow others to negotiate their status for them to prove they were not ‘arm-chair’ soldiers or engaged in ‘child’s play’. The men’s service was a reflection on both their masculinity and their West Indian identities. Private A. Nesbitt of the 2nd battalion had described what motivated the fighting force in Egypt, a sentiment familiar from the Western Front, but with particular resonances for this campaign: ‘we realise now that we are representing our island home and therefore we are doing our best.’⁷¹ Though disheartened, this need as representatives of the West Indies, or individual islands, to prove their soldier like qualities and abilities was imperative. As Corporal Marsh put it, ‘we worked hard for our reputation and I am pleased to say we have got it.’⁷² The narratives of soldiering in Egypt put forward in the men’s letters drew on this hard work to secure a reputation that was often in competition with writing about the Western Front, where the task to overcome the role given was greater. The dangers of the being so close to the fighting in France were so emphasised as to potentially undermine the combat being done by the men in Egypt and Palestine. As such, the men’s letters worked equally as hard to construct and deliver an account of their service that adequately reflected their efforts and which challenged prevailing notions about this front.

Conclusions

In her contemporary short story, *Uriah's War* (2014), author Andrea Levy explores West Indian participation in the British West Indies Regiment during the First World War. Her narrator, Uriah, wanted to serve on the Western Front – that was the fighting he had read about in newspapers at home, which had encouraged him to join up. Uriah hoped for France, to be able to prove Jamaica's worth in what was seen as the ultimate martial test, in Levy's story. When he learns he is being sent to Egypt, he is initially disappointed. He soon recovers, though, when he realises how the BWIR were being deployed in France:

Who wanted to come all that way to be in a labour battalion...No rifle, no combat, but just as likely to die. That would have been a humiliation.⁷³

The consequences of restricting the service of West Indian men during the First World War were far reaching, for the future of their nations and the British Empire. The racial discrimination suffered by the men during their service and afterwards, culminating in the mutiny at Taranto in Italy, politicised the men and fuelled participation in nationalist and Pan-African movements. The poem, the 'Black Soldiers' Lament', attributed to George A. Borden, described the West Indian veteran's sense of emasculation through his military service:

With deep lament we did our job.
Despite the shame our manhood robbed.
We built and fixed and fixed again,
To prove our worth as proud black men
And hasten sure the Kaiser's end.⁷⁴

While the veteran was able to acknowledge the sense of having 'our manhood robbed', the serving men writing during the conflict, and those who served with them, constructed a broader definition of military service that included these black men and validated their contributions. The BWIR's service during the First World War allows us to explore how the limits of service were negotiated and subverted by the men in the midst of the conflict. Their writings were acts of resistance against these restrictions,

proof of their heroism, their discipline and their agency. Among the anger, frustration and strain that accumulated and fuelled veteran participation in nationalist campaigns and movements for independence were active constructions of a sense of West Indian and black manliness, which intersected with their military status and attempted to overcome its limitations.⁷⁵ War service, martial identities and languages of military sacrifice and achievement during the First World War remained crucial to West Indian political actions. Richard Smith has reflected that, 'the war provided colonial subjects with a masculine rhetoric and imagery as well as material experienced, that could be appropriated, contested or reinterpreted with long-term consequences for the Imperial order.'⁷⁶ The figure of the ex-servicemen and his heroism and suffering were mobilised within narratives of nationhood, as crucial as the injustices served to West Indian men by the British Empire.⁷⁷

Within the national and colonial legacy of West Indian service were individual constructions of masculine imagery and narratives of combat by West Indian servicemen. These were not provided by the war, though it was the necessary space for these ideas to emerge, but by the men themselves, testaments to their service in spite of the restrictions that had been placed upon them. Through their letters, the men of the British West Indies Regiment revealed their sense of their own masculinities as they claimed their role in the male activity of combat. By examining the words of the men written during the war, the asserted masculinities of West Indian men in different combat contexts come to light. On the Western Front, the perceived indignity and inferiority labour duties was challenged by the dangerous and heroic work of the men in the efficient provision of huge quantities of essential weaponry. In Egypt and Palestine, notions of 'arm-chair' soldiers were disputed by the men's declarations of their rigorous training, cool responses and perseverance in extreme conditions.

Though aware of the significance of collective West Indian service, whatever the end, the men's construction of new definitions of combat and use of languages of courage, heroism and sacrifice enabled them to individually reveal their own masculinities, of feeling 'like a man'. This was not just about claiming a stake in the ethos of service or revealing their role in the 'economies of sacrifice': their participation was embroiled in struggles for political freedom and equality, but that was not their day-to-day priority. The selected West Indian letters published together in the *Gleaner* or *Jamaica Times* collapsed the boundaries between the men and collectivised their endeavour and a shared language can be traced within the men's accounts. It should be remembered that these originated as personal letters to family and friends, to keep them informed about how the war was going and the personal experience of the author. In so doing the men articulated their masculinities as military men, which simultaneously created new definitions of combat and service. Their attempts to negotiate this discrimination that was instituted at a structural level reveals more fully the ongoing and urgent need to present a self which conformed to the masculine standards of military service and which reshaped these sufficiently to include the black West Indian troops.

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Notes

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² 'The West Indies and the War', *The Federalist and Grenada People*, 19 June 1915.

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⁴ Glenford D. Howe, 'Military Selection and Civilian Health: Recruiting West Indians for World War', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 44, 35.

⁵ Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 77.

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⁷ Major A. B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1885), 13.

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- ⁸ Richard Smith, 'Loss and Longing: Emotional Responses to West Indian Soldiers during the First World War', *The Round Table*, 103, 2 (2014), 245.
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- ¹² Santanu Das (Ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.
- ¹³ Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, 4.
- ¹⁴ Joseph, 104.
- ¹⁵ Joseph, 106.
- ¹⁶ Howe, 'Military Selection', 35. A note here on terminology: the men are collectively referred to as West Indian throughout, as per the title of the British West Indies Regiment though, where available, details of the specific colony the men came from will be included. Almost two-thirds of the men were Jamaican. The conflation of individual nationalities within a broader West Indian identity is reflective of the representations within the accounts: the particularities of Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, or other islands are rarely attended to. Catherine Hall provides a valuable reflection on the many meanings of the terms West Indies and West Indian that reveal the simultaneity of multiple identities involved. Catherine Hall, 'What is a West Indian?' *West Indian Intellectuals* ed. by *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* ed. Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 31-50.
- ¹⁷ Joseph, 103.
- ¹⁸ Joseph, 103.
- ¹⁹ Richard Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers During the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 57.
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- ²⁵ Rose, 44.
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- ²⁷ Jessica Meyer, *Men of War. Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 161.
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- ⁴¹ *The Gleaner*, 20 November 1916, 13.
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- ⁴⁸ Ramson, *Carry on*, 32.
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- ⁵⁵ Frank Cundall, *Jamaica's Part in the Great War, 1914-1918* (London: Published for the Institute of Jamaica by the West India Company, 1925), 39.
- ⁵⁶ Cundall, *Jamaica's Part*, 56.
- ⁵⁷ Streets, *Martial Races*, 12.
- ⁵⁸ Wood-Hill, *A Few Notes*, 6.
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- ⁷³ Andrea Levy, *Uriah's War* (London: Tinder Press, 2014), n.p.
- ⁷⁴ 'The Black Soldier's Lament', International War Veterans Poetry Archive <http://iwvpa.net/borden_ga/the-blac.php> [accessed: 18 July 2017].
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Figure Captions:

Figure 1. West Indian troops stacking 8-inch shells at a dump on the Gordon Road, Ypres, October 1917. © IWM (E(AUS) 2078).
 [http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213105]